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ABSTRACT

There is a need for highly trained professional staff, particularly paraprofessionals, in Title I schools. If paraprofessionals are spending a significant amount of time working with Title I students in a teaching environment, it is crucial that they possess the knowledge and skills sufficient to help the students achieve the same high standards expected of all students. Title I funds can be used to increase the access of paraprofessionals to services for improving their skills. Paraprofessionals should be included in professional development activities. They also need career ladder programs to help them obtain the education necessary to become certified teachers. Several states and local education agencies have established projects that can be used as examples for others wishing to implement professional career ladders. Many types of federal financial aid are available as resources for paraprofessionals seeking education degrees or teaching certificates. They include Pell grants, Direct Stafford Loans and Federal Family Education Stafford Loans, campus-based programs, teacher recruitment grants, and loan forgiveness. General eligibility requirements include being a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or U.S. permanent resident and attending school at least half-time (for certain grants). (SM)

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ED 427 001

PARAPROFESSIONALS: A RESOURCE FOR TOMORROW'S TEACHERS

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The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as amended by the Improving America's Schools Act established an educational framework in which all children are expected to achieve to high academic content and performance standards. This focus on high academic standards for all children, including those served under Title I, necessitates having highly qualified professional staff that can teach to these high standards.

Nowhere is the need for highly trained professional staff, particularly paraprofessionals, more critical than in Title I schools. The Final Report of the National Assessment of the Chapter 1 Program (February, 1993) reported that paraprofessionals accounted for about half of all Chapter 1 staff. Similarly, the recent Follow-up Survey of Schools (1997-98 school year) found that 69 percent of Title I schools employed paraprofessionals. Twenty-two percent reported that paraprofessionals spent 51-75 percent of their time working with students in groups and 38 percent of Title I schools surveyed reported that paraprofessionals spent 26-50 percent of their time working with students in groups. Yet, many paraprofessionals are ill equipped to provide instructional services necessary to enable students to reach the high academic standards called for under the ESEA. The Final Report of Chapter 1 revealed that most Chapter 1 paraprofessionals in elementary schools had only a high school diploma; only 13 percent had a B.A. or B.S.; and only 4 percent had more advanced formal education.

If paraprofessionals are spending a significant amount of time working with Title I students in a "teaching" environment, it is critical that they possess the knowledge and skills sufficient to help those students achieve the same high standards expected of all students. There are several ways in which Title I funds may be used to increase the access of paraprofessionals to services to improve their skills. First, paraprofessionals can and should be included in professional development activities. Second, Title I funds may be used, and I encourage districts to use Title I funds, to create career ladder programs for Title I paraprofessionals to obtain the education necessary to become licensed and certified teachers. In fact, many districts are currently providing this type of support. The results from the Follow-up Survey of Schools indicate that 24 percent of Title I schools reported that their districts offered a career ladder for paraprofessionals. Fourteen percent indicated that their districts offered release time for higher education courses, and 20 percent reported that their districts offered funding for higher education. While these are significant improvements as compared to four years ago, these options should be more available to paraprofessionals across the country.

Using Title I funds to enhance the knowledge and skills of paraprofessionals will likely reap

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large dividends. Paraprofessionals often have accumulated valuable experience in their schools and communities and have acquired many of the interpersonal skills needed to work effectively with children. In addition to having substantial classroom experience to draw upon, paraprofessionals enrolled in teacher preparation programs, research indicates, are frequently highly motivated and engaged educators who are interested in teaching in their home communities. As a result, the attrition rate of paraprofessionals is low relative to that of other teacher trainees. Finally, providing career ladder opportunities can be an effective means of recruiting from a culturally and linguistically diverse pool to serve an increasingly diverse, multicultural student population, and assist our nation in building a much needed diverse workforce of teachers.

Several States and local educational agencies have established projects that can be used as examples for others wishing to implement paraprofessional career ladders. While not all of these examples involve the use of Title I funds, Title I funds can be used to create similar career ladder programs for Title I paraprofessionals.

EXAMPLES

- ***Kansas City, Missouri School District's Paraprofessionals Evolving into Teachers (PET)*** Project provides Title I paraprofessionals with the opportunity to engage in a three year elementary education university degree program. The pilot began in September 1994, with the first graduating class in May 1997. It is a partnership of the Kansas City Missouri School District's (KCMSD)Title I program and the University of Missouri-Kansas City. The University developed and implemented a multi-year class schedule that permits the completion of a degree in elementary education while maintaining full time employment as a paraprofessional. Title I pays participants' tuition costs in lieu of their receiving workshop stipends. KCMSD Title I staff and the University also support an on-going mentoring program and assistance network. Applicants are required to have a minimum of 60 college hours to be considered for PET and must commit enough time to earn a minimum of 27 semester hours over a 12 month period. Classes are held during weekday evening hours, summer school sessions and on selected weekends. Twenty-four members of the first class of 27 completed requirements for degrees in May 1997. Twenty-three have been hired as teachers by the KCMSD.

- ***North Carolina has two paraprofessional programs.*** *The Model Teacher Education Consortium* operates in ten rural districts, each of which contributes on a $1 per child formula basis. Additional funds are provided by the State, corporations and private foundations. The monies are used to cover tuition cost, ensuring the paraprofessionals pay a maximum of $40 per undergraduate course and only 50% of graduate course costs. Additionally, paraprofessionals are paid $500 per month during their student teaching. *The North Carolina Teacher Assistant Scholarship Loan Program (TASL)* also awards forgivable loans to paraprofessionals in amounts not to exceed $1,200 per year for students at a four-year institution. Participants must have at least a year's experience as a

teacher assistant and must meet certain standards, such as maintaining a 2.5 GPA and passing the core battery exams. Preference is given to applicants who have worked as a teacher assistant for at least 5 years and whose position as a teacher assistant has been abolished.

- **California** (Paraprofessional Teacher Training Program), **New York** (Preservice Preparation Project for Paraprofessionals), and **Texas** (Teacher Recruitment, Retention, and Assistance Program) also have programs.

- ***Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) Paraeducator Career Ladder*** is a joint project of the LAUSD and Service Employees International Union Local 99. It was developed as a means to support district employees interested in becoming teachers and to guide them toward areas of teacher shortage. The program is funded-primarily by the Board of Education which provides $900,000 annually. It also receives funds through the State of California Paraprofessional Teacher Training Program.

  Participants are placed on one of five levels, depending on their previous education and assessments of performance in teaching related areas of skill and knowledge. As they progress toward their credentials, they move up the Ladder. While in the program, participants are offered a wide range of support services. When they receive their credential, they are expected to work for the district for two years if offered a teaching position. All district paraeducators, including those working in Title I, bilingual, special education, and children's center programs, are eligible to participate.

  Support services provided by the Paraeducator Career Ladder include partial tuition reimbursement, support groups and mentoring, job counseling and information, access to additional educational counseling by California State University advisors, and California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) and MSAT preparation.

  There are 4000 current program participants. Over 500 participants have become K-12 teachers since July 1, 1995. These teachers are over 85 percent minority and 65 percent bilingual with five percent working in special education. To date, retention as teachers in LAUSD has been 100 percent.

FEDERAL STUDENT AID PROGRAMS

Federal financial aid can be an important resource for paraprofessionals seeking education degrees or teaching certificates. The following types of student assistance are available to full- and part-time students taking a course of study that leads to a degree or certificate and meets the U.S. Department of Education's requirements (Pell Grants, Federal Perkins Loans, FFEL Stafford Loans, Direct Loans). Additionally, the newly enacted Higher Education Act established grants and loan forgiveness options for individuals interested in becoming teachers. These types of Federal student financial assistance are available for students enrolled at least

half-time in a program to obtain a professional credential or certification required by a State for employment as an elementary or secondary school teacher.

TYPES OF ASSISTANCE:

Pell Grants

Federal Pell Grants provide financial assistance based on economic need to undergraduate students who have not earned a bachelor or professional degree. Unlike loans, Pell Grants do not have to be repaid. The amount of the grant varies depending on a student's financial need, the yearly amount it costs to attend school, whether the student is attending full- or part-time, and whether the student attends school for a full academic year or less. Pell Grants can be awarded to students enrolled on a less than half-time basis who meet the other eligibility criteria.

Direct Stafford Loans and Federal Family Education Stafford Loans

Students enrolled in an institution of higher education at least half-time to obtain a degree or certificate can apply for subsidized and unsubsidized loans through the Direct Stafford Loan Program and the Federal Family Education Stafford Loan program. Subsidized loans are awarded on the basis of financial need. No interest is charged before repayment begins or for six months after the recipient graduates, leaves school, or the enrollment status drops below half-time. Unsubsidized loans are not awarded on the basis of need and interest is charged from the time the loan is granted until it is paid in full. The financial aid administrator of the school an individual wishes to attend can help determine how much money can be borrowed.

Campus-Based Programs

Campus-based financial aid programs are Federal student aid programs administered by the financial aid office of each participating school. Not all schools participate in all programs. The Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG) is for undergraduate students with exceptional financial need and gives priority to students who receive Federal Pell Grants.

An FSEOG does not have to be paid back. A Federal Perkins Loan is a low-interest loan for both undergraduate and graduate students with exceptional financial need. The school is the lender and the loan is made with Federal government funds. The loan is repaid to the school.

Teacher Recruitment Grants

States are eligible to compete for funds to award scholarships to help students pay the costs of tuition, room, board, and other expenses of completing a teacher preparation program. Under this program, students receiving these scholarships would be required to teach in a high-need district for the same amount of time for which they received the scholarship, or until they pay it back.

Loan Forgiveness

Federal assistance in the form of loan forgiveness has also become available for teachers that qualify. This new program permits the Secretary of Education to forgive up to $5,000 of the outstanding loan if a teacher completes five years of teaching in an eligible school; teaches at the secondary level in the same subject area in which the degree was granted; or, if teaching at the elementary school level, has demonstrated knowledge and teaching skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and other subjects.

GENERAL ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- With certain exceptions, an individual seeking Federal student aid must be one of the following:

  U.S. citizen;

  U.S. National (includes natives of American Samoa or Swain's Island); or

  U.S. permanent resident with an Alien Registration Receipt Card.

- Students must be attending school at least half-time to be eligible to receive Direct or FFEL Stafford Loans programs. Half-time enrollment is not a requirement to receive aid from the Federal Pell Grant, FSEOG, and the Federal Perkins Loan programs.

Free information on these programs, including application forms, is available from the Federal Student Aid Information Center between 9:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday at 1-800-433-3243. This is a toll-free number. Individuals who use a device for the hearing-impaired may contact the Federal Student Aid Information Center by calling 1-800-730-8913, a toll-free TTD number.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education's World Wide Web site at http://www.ed.gov has a special section devoted to student aid. Another valuable source of free information is the U.S. Department of Education's Project EASI web site that offers students a "one-stop shopping" library of information on financial aid from government and private sources. The site is located at http://easi.ed.gov.

Establishing career ladders is an effective tool for helping today's paraprofessionals increase their knowledge and skills and become the teachers of tomorrow. At the dawn of the 21st century, having high-quality professional staff who have the knowledge and skills to teach to the high academic standards expected of all children is imperative in order to afford **all children**, particularly children served under Title I, the opportunity to be successful in the new millennium.